

Shelby Stanger:

The presenting sponsor of this season of Wild Ideas Worth Living is Subaru. One thing I just learned that I thought was very cool is Subaru is donating 50 million meals to help feed people in need during the COVID-19 crisis. They know this pandemic is devastating our country and has left hundreds and thousands out of work and unable to feed themselves or their families. Through the Subaru Love Promise, a commitment to support their communities, Subaru and their retailers across the country are making a donation to provide 50 million meals to Feeding America. This action called Subaru Loves to Help will make meals available at 199 local food banks across the country. In addition, Subaru retailers will be doing other things to help these local food banks, including food deliveries, donations, and volunteer events. Subaru knows their ongoing support will be necessary as local communities work to get back on their feet. Subaru Loves to Help just one part of the Subaru Love Promise, one more reason that makes Subaru more than a car company.

Shelby Stanger:

You talk a lot about competition and I'm a competitive SOB, but sometimes as women, competition can be a little bit of a dirty word.

Amber Pierce:

It can. Yeah. It's a funny thing, because some people just embrace it and have no problem with it. But I think that there's a huge fraction of women who don't always get really good social feedback for being competitive. I think a more general experience is that if a man is competitive, he's looked at as ambitious and a go-getter. As a woman, maybe not such a nice word, right?

Amber Pierce:

I was a swimmer when I was younger, and, again, always competitive, but always worried about "I don't want to beat my friend." Especially if the person I'm racing against is a good friend or a colleague, there's that sense of wanting to be liked, not wanting to hurt feelings, and it finally dawned on me that, actually, competition is a really cooperative effort. When I'm training by myself, I can push myself really, really hard, right? But I can never go as deep as I can when there's a competitor next to me.

Amber Pierce:

Her presence is what prompts me to dig deeper than I ever thought I could and to discover strengths that I didn't know I had. I can't do that alone. It's the competitive arena that creates this amazing environment where we can actually dig deeper than we ever thought we could and discover these things about ourselves. Actually, in that sense, your competitor next to you, pushing you is your greatest ally. The cool thing about that is you're doing the same thing for her.

Shelby Stanger:

When Amber Pierce talks about being a competitive athlete, she means it. At age ten, she was already competing seriously. Then in college, she received a D1 scholarship to swim at Stanford, but ultimately, she ended up becoming a pro cyclist. Amber signed her first pro contract with the Webcor Builders pro cycling team in 2006, and since then, she's won more than 60 individual races across five continents. As a competitor for most of her life, Amber's all about encouraging healthy competition, especially among women athletes.

Shelby Stanger:

I'm Shelby Stanger, and this is Wild Ideas Worth Living. Amber Pierce started cycling in her early twenties, and within a year, she turned pro. But for Amber, it's not just about the sport. It's about the competition, and that's where she thrives. She's also on a mission to reframe the culture around competition for women. But before we dive into her work with female athletes today, I wanted to go back to how she fell in love with competing in the first place.

Shelby Stanger:

Note we recorded this episode back in January of 2020 at the outdoor retailer show in Denver. That was back when gathering and hugging and being around people was normal. Times have certainly changed, and while these stories might have moments that might not seem as relevant as they may have seemed at the outset of 2020, the adventures are still important and inspiring.

Shelby Stanger:

You were competitive even as a kid, and you grew up really competitive swimming. So where'd you grow up, and how'd you get into swimming.

Amber Pierce:

I grew up in Reno, Nevada, and yeah, I tried all kinds of sports as a kid. I was really lucky that my parents just signed us up for everything, let us try everything, and they really also let us kind of follow our own intuition and our own motivation as far as what sport did we really enjoy and which ones we didn't like. I tried softball. That did not go well. In fact, a couple weeks ago, I was going through some old stuff, and I found my certificate from the softball team. I think it read, "Most improved outfielder," which is just a nice way of saying, "Maybe you want to try something else."

Amber Pierce:

So not a fan of the softball for me, but swimming really captured me. So I did this stroke class to learn all the different strokes, and I just loved it. They invited me at the end of the stroke class to see ... They said, "You want to try joining the swim team?" I thought, "Yeah, this sounds awesome," and I went home and announced to my parents, "I'm joining the swim team." They thought that was hilarious, because up until that point, I hadn't stuck with anything for more than a few months.

Shelby Stanger:

How old were you?

Amber Pierce:

About ten.

Shelby Stanger:

Wow. So fifth grade.

Amber Pierce:

Yeah. I was just like, "This is it, man."

Shelby Stanger:

So you probably ... What were your training days like? Because swimmers, they've got no joke training days. It's like five in the morning and then at night.

Amber Pierce:

Yeah. Well, I was really lucky. The coaches that I had growing up were ... They were really, really aware of the long-term, the big picture. So they really progressed me gradually. I mean, I think in other programs, I might've been pushed harder earlier, but they were really gradual in progressing me up to higher and higher levels of volume and intensity and all of that.

Amber Pierce:

So it took a while to build up to it. But, I mean, at 12, I was doing some double days. In high school, my routine was to get up at four in the morning and go to swim practice before school. I actually really loved that. I'm kind of self-diagnosed ADD or ADHD, and, honestly, I think that that was a huge component in being successful in school, because it calmed my brain down so that when I got to school, I could really focus and kind of get into flow.

Shelby Stanger:

I think there's something to be said for wearing out a kid before school so you can focus.

Amber Pierce:

Oh, man. Yeah. I used to run before school, only because I had to focus.

Shelby Stanger:

Yeah, yeah.

Amber Pierce:

But it made me a good runner. I know my mom would give us a hard time during final exams week. She'd be like, "Don't you want to sleep in a little bit, maybe get a little extra sleep before your test?" I was like, "No way, man. Are you kidding? I've got to go swim so that I can be on it."

Shelby Stanger:

But there was never a girl that you looked up to that was doing it or another coach or ... You just kind of always had it in you? Were your brothers and sisters competitive?

Amber Pierce:

I don't know. I think it was just in me. Yeah, when I got into swimming, there were ... I mean, Dana [inaudible 00:00:05:36], she was one of my biggest competitors when I was growing up. We're going head-to-head when we're 12 years old, right? But we had so much fun together, and neither of us held back. We lifted each other up through all of that.

Amber Pierce:

So having competitors like that that really bought into this, and even though I couldn't have, at that time, articulated it the way that I can now, that was what was happening, was that competition is cooperation, that every time I dig deeper, I'm raising the bar for her, and she's raising the bar for me.

Shelby Stanger:

But there was never any shit talking? Because in soccer ... I was a soccer player. I had friends on the other team, but when we played against each other, we were mean. That's just how it was. Soccer players, we were kind of nasty. I mean, not that nasty, but a little bit.

Amber Pierce:

But part of that is, again, going back to when you show up to the line or you show up to that competitive arena and you're doing that favor for your competitor, you are being the one that's digging deeper and forcing her to find that strength that she didn't know she had. Honestly, the best favor you can do to your competitors and everybody there is to not hold back and to be merciless.

Shelby Stanger:

What were your events?

Amber Pierce:

It really shifted over the years, but eventually, in high school, I was more of an individual medley swimmer, so the 200 and 400 IM. That's what I was recruited for for college.

Shelby Stanger:

Amber set multiple state and national records through high school. Turns out tiring herself before school actually helped her concentrate. She graduated high school as a valedictorian and earned a scholarship to Stanford. But part way through college, she injured her rotator cuff and couldn't swim anymore. There had to have been a little bit of a depression after swimming was done.

Amber Pierce:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was tough. Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

What happened, and how'd you deal with it? Only because I think a lot of people listening have been injured, and it's hard.

Amber Pierce:

Being injured is so hard. One of the peculiar things about it is the second that you're injured, you feel like you're never going to be healthy again. Then the second you get healthy again, you feel like you're never going to be injured again. That's just like ... You get stuck in this place.

Amber Pierce:

But I think there's so many components of injury that are difficult. There's a loss of identity, the loss of the ability to express yourself through movement, the loss of that outlet that's so reenergizing when you

get out and have that time to yourself to move in your body. I think all of those things are so difficult to lose.

Amber Pierce:

Over the years, what I learned is that when you're on the front side, when you're still healing, an extra day, an extra week, it feels like an eternity, and you just can't wait to get back. But then once you get on the other side of it, it always feels like, "Oh, it actually went by faster than I thought."

Shelby Stanger:

So how'd you deal with the loss of identity part? Because when I was in college, I played soccer, and I played soccer all growing up, Olympic development, all of it. I ended up going to a Division 3 school, not a D1 school, at the end of the day, because I was over it, just burnt too soon. Then I quit my sophomore year in college, after I did an internship in South Africa, and I was like, "Wow, there's so much more to life than a green grass or dirt track." I was so excited, but it was so hard, because I'd been Shelby Soccer Player my whole life, and you'd been Amber, this phenomenal swimmer, your whole life. How did you deal with that?

Amber Pierce:

Not well.

Shelby Stanger:

Yeah, talk to me about that.

Amber Pierce:

Honestly, I think my knee-jerk reaction to it was to just avoid it. It was to the point where I couldn't set foot on a pool deck for a couple of years without the smell of chlorine actually-

Shelby Stanger:

PTSD a little?

Amber Pierce:

Seriously, it was like a Pavlovian anxiety attack. It was crazy. It's funny, because we tend to think of process as being really linear, right? You get out of it what you put into it, and that's true to an extent. But the truth of it is it's usually really not linear. You could put a lot into something and not see returns for a long time. Then, all of a sudden, you just get this huge leap forward, or maybe you have a little bit of a setback, but it tends to not be linear.

Amber Pierce:

There was this incident that happened that just was so incredibly healing and so quickly, and that's what I mean by the nonlinear part. It wasn't like I was working through this and steadily making progress. I was not handling it well. But I got really, really depressed for a while, really severely depressed, to the point where it was so hard to get out of bed in the morning and just get dressed and go about my day.

Amber Pierce:

I mean, I was in school, so I needed to get up and go to classes, and it was really hard. So I made a deal with myself that if I could get up, showered, and dressed and out of the house by nine AM, then I could reward myself with a mocha at Starbucks. That was like this little deal that I made with myself.

Shelby Stanger:

I do this shit, too, so this is amazing, listening to someone who does this.

Amber Pierce:

So on the good days, when I got to get to Starbucks and get a mocha, it was really good, and I didn't always do it, but it was a nice little reward system. I remember I was standing in line one day at the Starbucks, because it was a good day, but you're still just in this very dark and swirly place. I was in line, and there was a gentleman, elderly gentleman standing behind me. He said, "Oh, you've got to be an athlete. What do you do? Basketball? What do you do?" I was just like ... because here I am in the crux of this struggle of identity, and I said, "No, no, I'm not an athlete." He said, "What do you mean, you're not an athlete?" I was like, "Well, I used to be a swimmer."

Amber Pierce:

He just looked at me, and it was one of those moments where it was just like he just went straight to the soul and he said, "No, once an athlete, always an athlete." It was exactly what I needed to hear in that moment, and it was amazing. This complete stranger was able to just advance me so far along this path of healing. It was amazing, and it's amazing to me, too, how many women I talk to who have raced like six triathlons and they're like, "Yeah, but I'm not an athlete." It's like, "Come on, man."

Amber Pierce:

There's no standard that you have to hit to qualify to call yourself an athlete. It's always going to be a part of your identity, and whether or not you happen to be engaged in racing or pinning on a number, or maybe you're not even playing soccer anymore, you're doing something else, it doesn't mean that ... It's always going to be a part of who you are, and what that guy did for me, that moment was to just hit that home for me and just say, "Hey, this will always be a part of who you are. It's not a loss that you have to mourn."

Amber Pierce:

So I tried to run just to stay fit, and I was like, "I'm just a terrible, terrible, terrible runner." I was in grad school at the time, so I was going into the lab every day, complaining about shin splints. My advisor literally one day just said, "For the love of God, please just take my bike. You can have it. Just try another sport, because this is obviously not working for you."

Shelby Stanger:

So he gave you a bike. You went on it.

Amber Pierce:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Shelby Stanger:

What was it like?

Amber Pierce:

It was amazing. So literally every day on my lunch ride, I would just go ride around pebble beach. I mean, who gets to do that? It was amazing.

Shelby Stanger:

So you fell in love with a bike, but there's a part of the story we've left out. You were really fricking good, really fast.

Amber Pierce:

It was fast. I'll give you that. It was fast, but it wasn't that fast. The very first year that I was actually racing, I got convinced by some of my fellow grad students to start mountain bike racing, because there was a collegiate mountain bike race team, and they were like, "Oh, come race." At that point, I was still really burned out on competition, and I just said, "I'm sorry. I don't do that anymore. I don't race anymore. That's just not my thing." They said, "Well, it's not so much racing as it is we just road trip on the weekend and camp out in a really cool place. Then we party all weekend, and at some point you ride your bike."

Shelby Stanger:

Fun.

Amber Pierce:

I know, right? Who's going to say no to that? So I was all in, but not in for the racing. I was in for the social scene, and I loved that part. I didn't really train seriously, because I didn't want the pressure of having to have an expectation in the race. So I did a whole mountain bike season like that, nothing spectacular. I wasn't some phenom, and then the road season rolled around. They're like, "Oh, come out and do road. It's just like mountain biking," which is not true, but it was the same group of people, and I had just become really great friends with these folks. I had a great time just going to the road races with them, and it was the same thing, where I didn't really want to jump in with both feet, because I was pretty burned after swimming.

Amber Pierce:

But toward the end of that season, I got called up to race nationals not because I was amazing, but because we just didn't have that many women on the team, and I didn't do that well. I got dropped in the criterium, and I crashed out of the road race. So it was not a spectacular first showing. But when I was there, I got to watch some of the people race who were actually really good, and watching them just rip those corners, I mean, honestly, it was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen in my life, and it just flipped a switch in my soul that was like, "Man, this is what I'm missing."

Amber Pierce:

That competitive side of me that had been so tragically injured and derailed after the burnout from swimming just came back online, and it was like, "Yeah, I want to do this."

Shelby Stanger:

So you quit swimming. You got into cycling. You go to nationals.

Amber Pierce:

Oh, yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

Pretty much within six months, you're a professional cyclist.

Amber Pierce:

So what happened at nationals, I had that moment, right, where I was like, "Dang, this is awesome. I really want to get good at this," and I made that decision. I was like, "Okay, now I'm going to train. Now I'm going to get serious about this." I was in this wonderful environment where everyone on my collegiate team was super supportive. David, my then boyfriend, now husband was incredible in teaching me the tactical side of things. It was really fun. I'd go to a race and he'd say, "Okay, ten laps to go do this, five laps to go do this, three laps to go do this." I'd just do what he said, and I'd win. I'd be like, "Cool, I'm going to listen to this guy. He knows what he's talking about."

Shelby Stanger:

Dating an athlete is so helpful.

Amber Pierce:

It's so helpful. But the whole team was so supportive. So once I started training appropriately and really taking it seriously, then the results started to come. So that's when I really just fell in love with it. I do have a competitive streak, and I love the fact that I can step into this arena and fully embrace that side of myself and celebrate it, right? Not feel weird about it. There's just no hesitation. It's all the celebration of that side of who I am, and I love that piece of it.

Amber Pierce:

But road racing in particular, it's very tactical. So one of the analogies I like to use is it's kind of like a combination of NASCAR, chess, and boxing. So it's like NASCAR in the sense that everybody shows up to the line with a full fuel tank, so to speak. So you have a fixed amount of energy, and you can take on some food during the race and all of that. But realistically, you've got only so many matches to burn.

Amber Pierce:

So you have to be really judicious about how you use that energy, and the way that you do that is by using the draft. So if two people are on a road together and one's running behind the other one in just pretty standard conditions, the person who's behind is doing about 30% less work. So you can imagine the energy savings over 100 kilometers, let's say, and if that person just stays behind the person in front the whole time, they're going to easily out-sprint that person at the finish line.

Amber Pierce:

But then you add in teams, right? That's where you get the chess component. So you have teams of eight to ten riders, and each of those riders has their own strengths. So they're kind of like a little chess piece. So my team would sort of use me appropriately on the course to help somebody else on the team, maybe if it's a mountain top finish, win the race.

Amber Pierce:

So what we would do is we would figure out before the race who has the best chance of winning on this course, and then everybody else on the team is going to use their own strengths to make sure that that person has the best chance of winning the race. So, in that sense, one of the things I really like about it is if you have a team of eight, seven of you have already decided before the race starts that you're going to sacrifice your own opportunity to win so that one of your teammates can stand on the podium.

Shelby Stanger:

That's hard and pretty beautiful, at the same time.

Amber Pierce:

It is beautiful, honestly. One of the things I discovered not that long ago is the etymology of the word sacrifice is "to make sacred." I think that's such a beautiful way of thinking about it, and it honestly really speaks to how it felt for me. If I sacrifice my opportunity to win and my teammate got on the podium and she and I both know she couldn't have done that without what I did or what our teammates did, it is the best feeling in the world.

Amber Pierce:

It is such an amazing feeling, and the cool thing is that usually what would happen is in some races, I'm helping her. In another race, the team's racing for me. When you have that experience of an entire team sacrificing for you, man, you dig deep, and then when you can deliver the win for them, it is the most amazing feeling. I think that the bonding that comes from that is just ... It's something incredibly special, and it's one of the things I love most about the sport.

Amber Pierce:

I had an amazing team and really experienced teammates that were really excited to help me get my upgrade point. So they were doing that thing that we talked about, where they're sacrificing their own opportunities to win to help me get results so I could upgrade. So shout out to Palo Alto Bicycles Women. That team was amazing.

Amber Pierce:

Again, being in this environment with amazing, competitive, successful women who are helping me raise my bar and raise my standard was just unbelievable. So then by the end of that season, I had an offer from ... There was a women's team in the area, Webcor Builders Pro Women's Cycling Team, and so in some ways it was right place at the right time. Unfortunately or fortunately, that's a big part of sport.

Amber Pierce:

So I was really lucky that when I was going to these local races and training for my upgrade points, I was often racing against professional-level women. Speaking of raising the bar, they made it hard on me, which was really great, because it really forced me to dig deep and learn a lot about myself as an athlete. That's the other cool thing, is even if you don't win, your competitor's going to teach you something about what you can do to come back and be better. Then by the end of the season, I think they knew me pretty well. They saw how I raced and then offered me a contract, and that was it.

Shelby Stanger:

Her lifelong work and dedication to athletics didn't let her down. Amber might not have become an Olympic swimmer, but she did become a professional cyclist who competed in Class 1 World Cups and World Tours for over a decade. When we come back, Amber talks more about her professional cycling career, the nitty-gritty behind nutrition and gear, and her work encouraging competition as cooperation for women.

Shelby Stanger:

Way back in the hazy days of 1971, a few dreamers started a little company in a loft above a Connecticut pickle factory and changed cycling forever. The beginnings were hardly revolutionary. Cannondale started out making panniers and outdoor gear, but from the start, there was something special, an unshakeable belief that there's always a better way to make a bicycle, even if it's not the easy or obvious one.

Shelby Stanger:

It's what drives Cannondale to continually revolutionize bicycle design with developments that improve every ride, creating some of the most fun, revolutionary, and iconic bikes ever built. Wherever you ride, whatever you ride, we think that Cannondale has a perfect ride for you, and we've got some highlights at REI, both in-store and online.

Shelby Stanger:

Let's take a closer look at the king of a new generation of gravel bikes, the Cannondale Topstone Carbon. The lightweight carbon fiber frame set is enhanced with unique rear kingpin suspension, improving the ride feel on every road, path, and gravel byway. Complete with quality Shimano groupsets, hydraulic disc brakes, large volume all-terrain tires, and Cannondale app connectivity, the Topstone Carbon is a true adventure bike. For more about the Topstone, check out the Cannondale range online or on REI's website, or better yet, pop into an REI store and speak to a bike expert who'll be able to help you find your perfect ride from Cannondale.

Shelby Stanger:

One thing that strikes me about cycling is there's a ton of strategy that the average spectator might not understand, for example, what Amber said earlier about the whole team working together for one person to win. Competitors bluff each other with their body language, or they try to chit-chat at a time when they're actually really hurting, but want to look like they're totally fine.

Shelby Stanger:

When Amber was competing full-time, she also had to be strategic in her training, including how she thought about her gear and nutrition.

Shelby Stanger:

Every cyclist I meet is really smart. You have to be, because there's so much tactics involved, and you have some calculations involved, but they're also really dialed in fitness and nutrition. I heard you on a podcast recently, and you were talking about fasting and how it's different for women than men. Can you talk to me about that, as well as other nutrition tips that you've learned that you think are really important that people might not think about?

Amber Pierce:

Yeah. So I'll just say so Stacy Sims is an amazing resource on this, and she has a great book called Roar, R-O-A-R. She really dives into female physiology, because a huge issue for all of us in sport is that most of the research that we have in exercise physiology up to this point has been done on men, mainly because we have this pesky little menstrual cycle that throws all the data off. So scientists like to work with men. because they don't have to deal with that additional factor. Well, guess what? It's an additional factor, and it seriously affects us, right?

Amber Pierce:

So a lot of what we see kind of filtering and trickling into our Internet feeds is trickling down from this research that's been done over the many past decades on men, and our hormones are way different. Hormones are really, really important to our physiology, and they really affect our performance, our moods, our lives, everything. So how our nutrition interacts with our hormones is super important.

Amber Pierce:

So Stacy has done some really, really groundbreaking work on this, and one of the key things that she's found and points out is that most of the research that's done on fasting in particular has been done on men and that women's physiology responds a lot differently than do men's physiology.

Amber Pierce:

So the caveat to that, though, is that everybody's different, right? So you can't make a blanket statement and say, "Fasting is bad for women," but it's really important for us to understand that just because some guy that you know is fasting and having a ton of success on it, it doesn't mean it's going to work for you. So you have to keep that in mind, and I think that one of the big things that I learned the hard way with training and nutrition was to eat enough.

Amber Pierce:

On the bike, it's all about your power to weight ratio, and it's not just about the performance, either. I mean, I'll tell you one of the things I really struggled with in my career was ... I mean, I'm 5'10". I'm not small. I'm not the classic body type that you see as a cyclist. I think one of the traps that we fall into not just as women, but people in general is you get into a sport and you have this stereotypical body type in your mind of what that athlete should look like. That might not be ... and I'll tell you, it wasn't for me. I'm 5'10". I don't care how much I diet. I'm never going to be 5'4". I'm not going to be a tiny little climber.

Amber Pierce:

I had this image in my mind of what a cyclist should look like, and I never looked like that. It really messed with my head, and the funny thing was I'm sitting here. I am a professional cyclist, and I'm thinking, "Oh, man, I don't have the body of a professional cyclist." Well, guess what? My body was literally the body of a professional cyclist. The funny thing was when I actually looked around in the Peloton, there was so many different heights and shapes and sizes, and all of us, yeah, we all bring different strengths to the table, but I think that this is one of those traps we fall into.

Amber Pierce:

Your body doesn't have to look like the stereotypical body of that sport. Give your body the fuel that it needs. Fuel the performance. Fuel your effort. Give yourself all the nutrition that your body's going to need to do the work that you're doing, and let your body figure out what's going to be optimal for you. It might not be the shape that you've imagined. It might not look like a magazine cover, but it'll be the shape that's most optimal for your physiology to do the type of work that you're doing.

Amber Pierce:

I think that's just a healthier approach in general, and I think it's way more effective than trying to fit some mold that has nothing to do with your own physiology.

Shelby Stanger:

I think that's so important to talk about. Sometimes we need to fuel ourselves a little more. I actually serve better when I'm a little bit bigger, but I don't exactly love how I always look in a bathing suit when I'm a little bit bigger.

Amber Pierce:

Right. Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

Well, whatever. I'm catching waves.

Amber Pierce:

Exactly.

Shelby Stanger:

My arms are big, and I can out-paddle everybody when I'm just a little bigger.

Amber Pierce:

Right. Your body in the form where it's going to perform the best might not look the way that you imagined it should, right? Allowing your body to optimize ... Your body's way smarter than you are. I mean, I can't tell my kidneys how to filter my blood appropriately. They're way smarter than I am at that. They're going to take care of that just fine, and the same thing with your body. Somebody said this to me the other day, and it's so true. Your body's always trying to help, right? So when you're going out and you're performing in your sport, your body's going, "Oh, this is the thing that we need to do now." So your body's automatically going to start making all these adaptations to optimize for that thing that you're doing. Just give your body the chance to do that. Help your body help you.

Shelby Stanger:

So eating enough is one of those tricks you've learned.

Amber Pierce:

Yeah, it's huge, huge. For women I think in particular, carbohydrate, I mean, carbohydrates are getting a really bad rap right now.

Shelby Stanger:

Oh, I eat so many carbs. It's great.

Amber Pierce:

Yes, especially for endurance sports. So a teammate of mine, Janel Spilker, formerly Holcomb, she had this really great equation that she taught me long, long ago. I quote her all the time. Whatever you're burning on the bike, try to eat that many calories before, during, and after your ride in the form of carbohydrate, and that will fuel your effort. Then when you're appropriately fueled for your effort, your mood is going to be better, which if you're in a good mood when you're training, it's going to affect your performance. It'll affect your confidence. You do that in every training session, and hey, guess what? Your performance and your confidence are just going to continue to build. But that's such a key thing, is fueling that effort and fueling the performance.

Shelby Stanger:

I'm just going to be honest. I've always thought women's cycling gear was pretty ugly and a little antiquated. I mean, I used to think women's board shorts were just terrible, and then Roxy came out. It changed my world, because I would surf in my Umbro soccer shorts and a sports bra.

Amber Pierce:

Right.

Shelby Stanger:

That's all there was. Athleta and Lululemon have transformed yoga. I'm seeing some cute cycling kits out there now.

Amber Pierce:

Oh, yeah. There's some really great stuff. It's really, really fun. I think the industry has finally realized that women are the fastest growing segment of this market, and they're really starting to pay attention to what we need. To your point, I think one of the key things for women getting into cycling in particular, I just want to say, saddle. Saddle is so important.

Shelby Stanger:

The saddle is so your hoo-hoo doesn't hurt.

Amber Pierce:

Exactly. I think that that's one of the biggest barriers, is when we get on a bike and they're like, "Man, I'm so beat up. This is horrible. Who would ever do this?" Honestly, the beauty now is there are so many different options out there. Just know that if you're in pain on your saddle, that's not normal. It doesn't have to be the case. Just go try different saddles, because I promise you, you will find one that works for you.

Shelby Stanger:

Besides saddles, what's the most important gear women should have for cycling?

Amber Pierce:

Oh, man. I've got to do a plus one for saddles again, because it's so important. But I guess secondary to that would be the chamois, and that's the pad that's in the bike shorts. For the record, if you've never worn a chamois, they are amazing and life-changing, but you need to get a good one, because otherwise they can chafe you in the wrong way. It's not good, but also don't wear your underwear with them. They're not meant to be worn with underwear. Just pro tip.

Shelby Stanger:

What Cannondale bike should I get?

Amber Pierce:

That's a really hard choice.

Shelby Stanger:

Entry level.

Amber Pierce:

Entry level, I really like the EVO, and they just totally redesigned it. It was my favorite bike before the redesign, and I was really scared about the redesign, but I am sold. It's beautiful. I will say if budget is an issue, just find a bike that's within your budget. Find one that's safe, that works. You don't have to be on that super high-end carbon bike to be a cyclist. You don't have to wear the right thing, have the right bike, look the right way to show up on the group ride and get involved in the sport and be part of the community. Just get out there.

Shelby Stanger:

REI sells bikes, and I think they'd probably sell used bikes now-

Amber Pierce:

Yeah. Yes, yes.

Shelby Stanger:

... which is so cool.

Amber Pierce:

Great resource. I really encourage people to find other people who ride, because it's just so much more helpful when you have somebody who can guide you through some of the key things that ... I mean, I kind of use the analogy of sometimes getting into a sport is like hacking your way through the jungle in the dark with a really dull machete, because there's not always a really clear path forward, but the truth is a lot of other people have been out there, hacking their way through that same jungle. So learning from other people, and what are the mistakes that they made? How can you learn from that?

Amber Pierce:

No one's going to define your path for you, because that's part of what's so awesome about it, is that you get to create this path of yours that's unique. I think one of the things to keep in mind is if you have

aspirations to become professional or even if you don't, whatever it is that your goal is, there's a million ways to get there. You don't have to follow the same path that somebody else did. You don't have to have a certain personality type or a certain story. Create your own story to get there, and I think that's the cool thing about cycling, is there are so many opportunities and pathways that you can take to get there. There's something for everyone.

Shelby Stanger:

I think what I'm seeing a lot of is these women's camps popping up and then learn to ride. REI does learn to ride your bike classes, which is so cool.

Amber Pierce:

Yes, yes.

Shelby Stanger:

You can learn to mountain bike, and you can learn to just ride a regular bike. You learn how to change a tire, which to me was really intimidating.

Amber Pierce:

Exactly. I was saying earlier, just learning to ride with one hand to signal appropriately in traffic or to look over your shoulder, learning to change a tire, those are the kinds of things that make you feel empowered to get out and ride safely. They're basic things, but they're super important, and I kind of look at them as keystone skills. The second you have that skill, you feel so much more confident and empowered to go out and ride and go out and explore and get in those adventures.

Shelby Stanger:

What about mentally staying tough? Is there a mantra you say to yourself to keep going or just to get out the door?

Amber Pierce:

I love that you use the word mantra. Yes. Not every day is going to be fun, and so I think that whenever you're setting a goal for yourself, I think it's really important to drill down on why is it that you're doing that, because the answer to that question is going to be the thing that gets you out the door on the days where you're really struggling or you're really tired. But I think a mantra is a really great way to work through whether it's a lack of motivation or a lack of fear, because a lack of motivation, a lack of fear, you can't just shut that off, right?

Amber Pierce:

So the cool thing about a mantra is you're not trying to shut the fear off, because you can't fight ... Don't fight yourself. Your fear is there for a reason. Your brain has this whole system that's wired to keep you alive, right? So fear is a natural and important part of our experience. So trying to fight it is not the best way, but a mantra helps you work with it, because a mantra, it helps you direct your attention to something else and displace the fear, right? You supplant it with a more positive thought or a more constructive thought.

Amber Pierce:

It's the same thing with a lack of motivation. It's just you're not fighting your natural tendency, which is there for a reason, right? You're working with it. You're working with your body. You're working with your psychology. So I love picking mantras.

Amber Pierce:

I'm not racing full-time anymore, and so I'm not as fit as I used to be. So going uphill is a little more painful. So recently, I've just been saying to myself, "I love this sensation. I love this sensation. I love this sensation." It's like after a while, you start to really believe it.

Shelby Stanger:

I love that Amber talks about the realities of day-to-day life as a pro cyclist. It just reinforces that anyone can become an athlete. Even if you don't have the fancy bike or the tight spandex, you can start. You can create your own path, and you can adopt a mantra or mental affirmation that works for you.

Shelby Stanger:

These days, Amber is all about supporting aspiring women athletes to show up with excellence and unleash their greatest potential.

Shelby Stanger:

So now you're really advocating for women in sports. So you started this organization, Network for Advancing Athletes, to support women athletes.

Amber Pierce:

Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

Tell me a little bit about that.

Amber Pierce:

So, like I said, as a swimmer, I got to train and race at Stanford. So I was surrounded by Olympic medalists, world champions, and then I got into cycling. Same thing. I'm surrounded by these Olympians and world champions. I mean, these women are amazing, and the cool thing is they're just incredibly kind, approachable human beings. Any one of them would love, love the opportunity to give back, to help an athlete who's aspiring and coming up through the sport.

Amber Pierce:

So in seeing that around me all the time, I realized that I'm in this really unique position to realize that that resource is there, but many people don't, because we're not the headline in mainstream media. I just thought, when you show up to a bike race, as an example, if an aspiring athlete were to come up and chat to me or any of my teammates, we would have all the time in the world for them. But how intimidating would that be, right, to be the person that's showing up to the race? You're kind of a newbie. To rock up to a women's pro team and be like, "Hey guys," it's not the most natural thing in the world.

Amber Pierce:

So I was just thinking there's just a huge untapped resource out there of these incredible women athletes who all started with no experience and then made their way through that crazy jungle, hacking their way with their dull machetes, and all of the things that they've learned that can help other women in their paths.

Amber Pierce:

So that was what Network for Advancing Athletes is all about. It's a nonprofit. It's not a huge organization. But it's basically just trying to create a place where women of any age, any experience level, we don't care if you want to be pro or you don't want to be pro, you're just getting into the sport, we have athletes who have been through it all who really want to help you, who really want to help you.

Amber Pierce:

So we pair people up with mentors. We do clinics. To your point, it's all women mentors mentoring women, women's clinics, because there's just a different energy. There's a different energy when you have a room full of women together, lifting each other up, and it's a really cool thing. So yeah, it's been a lot of fun to try to grow that on the side.

Shelby Stanger:

I think that's fantastic. So you have this saying, "Be a good wheel."

Amber Pierce:

Yes.

Shelby Stanger:

I've seen that on your website. What does that mean? How does that fit into the whole equation?

Amber Pierce:

So when you're in cycling and you do a group ride or you're in a race, there are certain people who are just really good wheels to be on. They're the person that you want to be behind, because you know they're going to take the good line, the fast line, the safe line. They're not going to take you over a giant pothole. They're going to point out obstacles for you. They know what they're doing. So they're going to be positioning themselves and be in the right place at the right time.

Amber Pierce:

So in a really literal sense, that's a thing, like, "Oh, so-and-so is a really good wheel." But there's this funny origin story. So getting back to David, when we first started dating, we were on a ride together, and we were just about to start a descent. I was on his wheel, and he kind of glanced over his shoulder and said, "You can trust me. I'm a good wheel." I was like, "Okay, cool," and then he turned around again and said, "That's a metaphor for life," which totally ... It's true. He's a great wheel in life as well.

Amber Pierce:

But that metaphor, it's so true, because there are people who are good wheels in the Peloton. Then there are people who are good wheels whether they ride bikes or not, and I love that at any level of sport, whether you're a professional or a beginner, whether you have aspirations to race or not, anybody can be a good wheel for somebody else.

Shelby Stanger:

You're really trying to be a good wheel for a ton of female athletes right now, which is such a big mission. It's a really good mission, so thanks for doing that.

Amber Pierce:

Thanks.

Shelby Stanger:

What are some of the results you've seen through your work?

Amber Pierce:

Oh, really, really cool stuff. I mean, what I find is most of the challenges that we all face are relatively universal. We're all human beings, and so most of us struggle with confidence. There are a lot of things that we can face on the bike, fears that we can face on the bike and overcome. It's like when you figure out how to take a corner at speed in a way that you feel really confident and in control and you're in that thrill zone of "Yeah, man, I'm on the edge, but I got this," when you can do that with something that you didn't think you could do on the bike, it makes you step back and question, "What else am I afraid of in my life that I thought maybe wasn't possible that maybe is? What else can I give myself permission to try to overcome in my life?" So you see it translate from the bike just across everything in people's lives. What favors are we doing anybody by ever holding back?

Shelby Stanger:

What's something that you thought isn't possible for your own life? What can you challenge? What can you give yourself permission to try, even if it feels scary and on edge, like biking around a tight corner or even just picking up a bike and riding it? Do yourself a favor and go for it. Try it. When we face our fears and show ourselves who we can be, we open up a world of possibilities.

Shelby Stanger:

If you're a female athlete or aspiring to be one, make sure you check out Amber's nonprofit, Network for Advancing Athletes at advancingathletes.org to find a mentor or attend a clinic. It doesn't matter how old you are or how experienced you are as an athlete. Amber's nonprofit is there to support you. Amber, thank you so much for coming onto the show, for bringing your dog. Talking to you definitely made me want to compete again. You can learn more about Amber at her website, amberpierce.us, or an Instagram [@ambermalika](https://www.instagram.com/ambermalika). That's [@-A-M-B-E-R-M-A-L-I-K-A](https://www.instagram.com/AMBERMALARMA-L-I-K-A).

Shelby Stanger:

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